

WALTER REED FIRST TO VACCINATE AGAINST SMALLPOX

by Michael E. Dukes

WASHINGTON (Army News Service, Dec. 18, 2002) -- More than 100 Walter Reed Army Medical Center and Aberdeen Proving Ground soldiers, along with civilian health-care workers, received smallpox vaccinations this week.

This first wave of vaccinations allows the new inoculation process to be tested, officials said. They explained that the Army ended its original smallpox vaccination program in the early 1990s and President Bush ordered the new inoculations to begin with military and primary-response health-care workers.

The Army's Office of the Surgeon General directed that vaccinations begin immediately for epidemic response team members. A more widespread rollout of the Army's vaccination program is planned in coming weeks.

Maj. Gen. Kevin C. Kiley, commander of Walter Reed and the North Atlantic Regional Medical Command, said much research and clinical use of the vaccine preceded the inoculations. He said that precautions are in place to provide an efficient and safe vaccination program.

"Every precaution will be taken to ensure the safety of our patients and staff," Kiley said. "We will monitor this initial group of vaccines for any adverse side effects."

The vaccination program at Walter Reed actually began Dec. 13 with the first set of educational briefings and screenings. Col. Renata J. M. Engler, director of the Walter Reed National Vaccine Healthcare Center, said the first 15 people were vaccinated Dec. 16 and a "large vaccination run" of more than 100 people on Dec. 18. She gave several mass briefings throughout the week to inform personnel of what to expect and how to care for their vaccination site.

Additionally, Kiley held three town hall meetings through the week to tell Walter Reed staff why the initial controlled immunizations were being conducted. He also addressed their concerns and answered their questions.

In addition to soldiers, Walter Reed civilian employees were able to volunteer to participate as well. "We [have been] immunizing [government] civilian employees who are part of the Smallpox Response Plan," said Col. Dallas C. Hack, chief of the Walter Reed Preventive Medicine Service, and co-coordinator of the Walter Reed Smallpox Vaccination Program.

The Army is using Food and Drug Administration licensed doses of smallpox vaccine, also known as vaccinia or DryVax, manufactured by Wyeth Laboratories, according to Lt. Col. John D. Grabenstein, deputy director for military vaccines at the Office of the Army Surgeon General.

Grabenstein said rather than use the potentially lethal smallpox virus for inoculation purposes, vaccinia, a much weaker virus that has a lower rate of adverse reactions, is used.

"All vaccines cause side effects, but smallpox causes a unique reaction at the vaccination site. After vaccination, a red blister appears that should turn white six to eight days [later]. Then it will turn into a scab. This shows successful vaccination," Grabenstein said.

"Most people feel a stinging or burning sensation right after vaccination that lasts less than a minute," he added.

"Most people experience normal, usually mild, reactions, such as sore arm, fever, headache, body ache and fatigue," Grabenstein said. "These symptoms may peak eight to 12 days after vaccination.

"The lymph nodes in the armpit of the vaccinated arm or in the neck may become large and painful for a week or so," he said.

"The vaccination should become tender, red and itchy. A blister will form [at the site] and then fill with pus. When the scab dries and falls off on its own, after about two or three weeks, a permanent scar remains," Grabenstein said.

The inoculation is usually administered with a bifurcated needle with a fork-like tip. The tip has a tiny reservoir that retains a measured dose of the vaccine after being dipped into the vial. A series of small jabs at the inoculation site are made to deliver the vaccine. A person who is being immunized for smallpox for the first time receives three jabs. Anyone who has been vaccinated against smallpox in the past will receive 15.

"Because they already have some immunity, it is likely the vaccine will not 'take' if given with fewer jabs," Hack said.

Hack cautioned that the immunization is not for everyone.

"Individuals with a history of childhood eczema, those with eczema now, women who are pregnant, those who are immuno-compromised (for example: HIV and current cancer patients), those who are in prolonged close contact with [people with these conditions] and those who have children less than a year old in the home" should perhaps not take the vaccine, Hack said.

Those getting inoculated Dec. 18 did not seem worried while they stood in the long line leading to the immunization rooms. One second lieutenant who had never been vaccinated against smallpox, said she didn't mind sacrificing her holidays, especially if data from this initial run will improve the process for those who get immunized in coming weeks.

An Army specialist said the vaccination "didn't even hurt." But he admitted to being slightly apprehensive about it beforehand. In the final analysis, though, he said "I'd rather be vaccinated than not."

(Editor's note: Michael E. Dukes is a staff writer for the Walter Reed Stripe newspaper.)